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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

FRANCO-AMERICAN MEDITATIONS¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

IT is a difficult mission that Pierre de Lanux undertakes in his *Young France and New America*, and one is not merely reciprocating M. de Lanux's own exquisite amiability in saying that only a Frenchman could have done it without tactlessness. An Englishman would have been condescending; a Japanese would have been naïvely inept; a Russian would have been uncomprehending; an Italian would have been graciously fatuous. But M. de Lanux is a Frenchman; therefore he knows how to commend without the suggestion of patronage, and how to indicate shortcomings without offense. That is to say, he is a natural funambulist—his feats of interpretive balancing and critical wariness are accomplished without apparent effort and with a delightful absence of anxiety: you never feel that he is triumphing over any fear of the rapids beneath him—for him, you like to fancy, the rapids have been forgotten rather than heroically put out of mind. Yet that there *are* rapids beneath him, threatening and highly dangerous ones, is apparent from the most cursory glance at M. de Lanux's "Foreword" (we wish, by the way, that he had not acquired this pompous affectation of literary America, where no one any longer is content to write a simple "Preface").

What has M. de Lanux attempted in *Young France and New America*? "To define and to sum up," he says, "the possibilities which Franco-American relations will offer tomorrow on intellectual as well as on concrete grounds," concentrating especially on "the results of coöperation be-

¹*Young France and New America*, by Pierre de Lanux. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1918.

tween elements of the younger generation of both countries." This book is written "for the young men and women of America who are interested in the present life of France." It embodies the reflections of a Frenchman who spent the year 1917 in America.

At first blush, this sounds as if we were promised nothing more illuminating than the familiar compliments of Ambassadorial banquets, the reciprocal flub-dub of international amicability that has stereotyped the after-dinner oratory of a thousand Franco-American gatherings. How well we all know those ancient *clichés!* . . . "Common interpretation of republican principles . . . Love for country and for freedom . . . The friendship of the two Republics . . ." But M. de Lanux is too urgent a realist to come before us mouthing these desiccated platitudes. He has more pointed and definite things to say, a new kind of interchange to propose. After all of our old reasons for mutual understanding, he says, there exist now new and more powerful reasons. Chief among the new values which will be born from the present upheaval there is, for the French and ourselves, "the realization of common standards in life"; above all, there is to be recognized and justly appraised "the value of mutual knowledge between the youth of France and America." M. de Lanux perceives that the old generalities, the old hands-across-the-sea symbolizations, had lost, long before the war, whatever contact with reality they once possessed: he perceives that new and fresh interpretations, made with the eye on the object, patterned upon reality by internationalists of delicate intuition and richly sympathetic imagination, must be substituted for them, if the younger generation in "the two Republics" is to be persuaded to the accomplishment of fruitful contacts.

How is this intellectual and spiritual interchange to be brought about, and what results are to be hoped for from it?

Looking about him in America, M. de Lanux finds us divisible into two broad categories, having practically nothing in common save the name "American," and "ideals which have never had an opportunity to appear to be common." First, there are the families who lived here in the time of the Civil War, "mostly of English, Irish, Dutch, and French descent." Second, there are those who have arrived here since—chiefly Germans, Slavs, Jews, Italians,

Syrians, etc. It is M. de Lanux's theory that this latter and unamalgamated element will be made an organic part of us by the shedding of their blood in our common cause: "when they have given their blood, the last difference between you, which rested in an unequal experience, will be swept out, because they will have shared the greatest experience of your civic life." This is "the capital fact of the present evolution."

From this united and harmonized America M. de Lanux anticipates the more efficient exercise of certain virtues which he confidently attributes to us: our freedom from "old prejudices and methods," our "tendency to settle things according to elementary human right." And, further, he expects from us "some great artistic revelations." We shall soon be ready for "creation," and "already some splendid isolated works are showing the way."

What, then, do we need that France can give us, and with what can we recompense France? Let us traverse hurriedly (of necessity) some of our generous ambassador's deprecations and recommendations.

Are not, he asks, "some disputable forms of success" still pursued by us, "at the cost of happiness, health, and life itself, by men and women of rich resource who kill in themselves all possibility for deep, personal, original life"? They are, dear Sir, they are. But let us not dwell upon that undeniable, disconcerting, and somewhat over-familiar indictment; let us seek some fresh illumination. Here it is, perhaps: We are to benefit by the French tendency to criticise—"a certain intellectual, critical, negative tendency, which too easily turns into mockery": the faculty "to which the best of us [the French] owe their sense of proportion and the clear thinking for which they are noted." This is to act upon "the opposite faculty" possessed by Americans: "a positive, enterprising tendency to go after immediate results, embarrassed by very few hesitations." Now if we can agree, says M. de Lanux, to combine French craft, skill, science and critical deliberation with our own audacity, our "passion for visible and immediate results," little will remain beyond our reach. Thus it appears that the element in the French character which explains, says M. de Lanux, certain French failings—that "critical, negative tendency" which he exhibits—at the same time offers the best hope for coöperation between the youth of Amer-

ica and France. He means, it would appear, that *we* are to benefit by acquiring a habit of scrutiny and deliberation and self-examination, while *they* are to benefit by an infection of audacity and a "passion for immediate results."

We beg to protest that all this seems to us a darkening of counsel, chiefly because, as M. de Lanux states it without qualification, it isn't so. It is far more a French trait than it is an American trait to undertake new experiments, to explore and test new intellectual territory. We do not speak as one having authority—we are not a Frenchman. We bring into court one whose authority is indisputable: M. Pierre de Lanux himself. Hear him contradict himself: "France is a well-spring of creative power, a land of spiritual, scientific, and social experiments and experiences." In the face of this, it is unnecessary to observe that France is hardly in need of America's experimental impulse. If it *were* necessary, we should like to ask M. de Lanux if he has a vision of, let us say, M. Claude Debussy being inspired to new experiments in music by Professor Horatio W. Parker and Mr. Henry Hadley and Mr. Frederick S. Converse; M. Bergson being inspired to new meditations upon the inner life of man by the Rev. Dr. Hillis and the Rev. William Sunday; M. Francis Jammes being inspired to new poetic experiments by our excellent and indispensable American *Vers-libristes*; M. Paul Claudel sitting expectantly at the feet of the dramatic muse of Mr. Percy Mackaye. We are not attempting to set off equals against one another: we are merely assembling, for the sake of inciting suggestive reflection, a group of types. Alas, M. de Lanux, America suffers not from an excess of abundant creative life and positive endeavor in the regions of the intellect and the imagination, but rather from a lack of these things: our thinking and our feeling are too timid and formularized and traditional, rather than too audacious and experimental.

Undeserved rewards, said Meredith, are exquisite. But M. de Lanux is too generous; he is embarrassing. His trouble is that which beset Mr. W. W. Jacobs' old bargee—"too much affability: that's what's the matter with me," said the old bargee. And that's what's the matter with M. de Lanux. He seems honestly to love us, but he is wishing the wrong things on us. We do not need more self-consciousness and self-examination—the Pilgrim Fathers,

God forgive them, attended to that for us. We need what, in his soberer and less post-prandial moments, M. de Lanux knows perfectly well that France can give us—the France for whom he answers, with loving veracity, in reply to his own question, “What does France mean?” And then we see that he knows as well as any of us what France means: She means, he answers, “the land of free invention, discussion, and experiment for social progress; a living laboratory, where every new principle is tried before being spread over the world.” Those of her sons who today are fighting because they love France, have loved her, as he says, “because she meant that”—because, as we too are well aware, it is there that the gardens of the mind have gateways without number, and are flooded always with clear light.

The American soul, M. de Lanux, is at once a more naïve and a more wistful thing than the soul of France: it was born old, yet it has not yet grown up. But it is, in its own way, an incomparable thing, because of its passionate, unquenchable idealism; and to it there come, from time to time, noble thoughts, that pass across its depths and surfaces like great white birds. M. Maeterlinck himself, we think, would grant it; and so, with an even more generous alacrity, we believe, would our indulgent missionary from France.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.